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Judgment Comes First to the House of God and Justice Must Begin in the House of God Addressing Domestic Violence in the Church and as a Public Health Issue

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This article was initially prepared for publication in October – the month designated as Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Yet, Domestic Violence is not confined to one month, one race, one geographic location or one socio-economic group. So, the article comes to you now, not in response to a specific triggering act or the consciousness-raising awareness that October brings; this article comes to you because Domestic Violence is endemic, and the church must face it head-on. “Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, or technological actions or threats of actions or other patterns of coercive behavior that influence another person within an intimate partner relationship. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone.”¹

The COVID-19 Pandemic exposed a myriad of systemic problems in the health care system, including delivery, staffing, and disparities based on gender, race, socio-economic status, and location. These problems were not new or unknown in certain communities, but COVID-19 forced the issue to the surface. The pandemic also brought exposure to domestic violence; again, a problem that was not new or unknown, but simply ignored. “Domestic Violence has always been an underrated crime. As it mostly happens behind closed doors, many cases don’t see the light.”²

¹ “What Is Domestic Violence” <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/domestic-violence>, accessed September 21, 2022.

² “Domestic Violence – What Exactly Is It?” <https://domesticviolence.org/definition/> accessed September 21, 2022.

Domestic violence was exacerbated by proximity necessitated by sheltering at home during the pandemic. No one is immune from being a victim of domestic violence, also called Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). It is often directed to women and children.

IPV is a significant public health issue that has many individual and societal costs. About 75% of female IPV survivors and 48% of male IPV survivors experience some form of injury related to IPV. IPV can also result in death. Data from U.S. crime reports suggest that about 1 in 5 homicide victims are killed by an intimate partner. The reports also found that over half of female homicide victims in the United States are killed by a current or former male intimate partner. Many other negative health outcomes are associated with IPV. These include a range of conditions affecting the heart, muscles and bones, and digestive, reproductive, and nervous systems, many of which are chronic. Survivors can experience mental health problems such as depression and PTSD symptoms. They are at higher risk for engaging in behaviors such as smoking, binge drinking, and sexual risk activity. People from groups that have been marginalized, such as people from racial and ethnic minority groups, are at higher risk for worse consequences.³

Case Study: IPV in the Church

One area of violence that was brought to light during the pandemic was IPV in the church. One such unintentional exposure occurred because the desire for pre-pandemic fellowship coupled with inexperience with technological meeting platforms. The confusion between the mute button and the video button left participants in an undesired light, following the incident. Additionally, meeting organizers were left in precarious place when they witnessed or heard violence via technology.

Incident Recount:

In 2021, a group of clergy and lay leadership gathered for conversation, music, and prayer on a familiar digital platform. Participants joined the meeting as family groups, couples, and single individuals. People were happy to see one another. The pandemic started in 2020 but people felt as if it had been many years since they saw each other. Church anniversaries, pastor appreciation services, and conferences had been cancelled. The participants greeted each other with joy, catching up on the details about family, friends, and ministry strategies. One clergy couple greeted the group and engaged the others with highlights about their ministry. The wife seemed genuinely excited. Suddenly the video was turned off. Her husband shouted at her violently, admonishing

³ Fast Facts: Preventing Intimate Partner Violence
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html>, accessed September 21, 2022.

her for sharing too much information. She apologized and he continued to shout and berate her. The meeting host said politely but pensively, “We hear you.” In the husband’s apparent attempt to mute the device, he turned on the video. The wife’s hair was disheveled. The host then turned off the video and mic. Their picture as a loving clergy couple held their space on the screen. It was obvious that everyone was shaken by the incident. But no one said anything. The fellowship continued and eventually they turned their video back on. Her hair was neat and lipstick reapplied. She did not say anything for the remainder of the meeting. Her husband spoke for them and flashed a big smile as he shared words of encouragement about the pandemic and hope for the time when all would be able to gather in person. The fellowship did not regain its joyful tone and an awkward malaise now rested on the group.

Some Issues to Focus on:

“Domestic violence has been called a “silent epidemic” in American churches. A 2014 survey of pastors found that most church leaders significantly underestimated the level of abuse in their congregations. And a 2017 survey found that just under half of pastors had no policy in place on how to respond to victims of abuse. Four in 10 pastors rarely or never discuss the issue.”⁴

The response in the church to IPV is varied and ranges from prayer alone, to awareness and education and/or making the appropriate referrals. Although many states (in the United States of America) have mandatory reporting for child and elder abuse, in most states there is no mandatory reporting for IPV. Thus, without clear legal guidance, church leaders are encouraged to develop IPV policies, procedures, and practices which should affirm the humanity and dignity of all people – men, women, and children. Jesus Christ came that we may have abundant life. The abundant life includes a life free of violence or threat of violence especially from intimate partners and other close family members. Church leadership must remember that we are called to be peacemakers, justice workers, and ushers of the reign of God. Churches can lead the way in preventing IPV by stopping the practice of ignoring indicators of IPV and/or not listening to the victims. If church leaders have a problem with personal violent behavior or violence addiction, in addition to prayer, and working with an accountability partner, the offender should seek the appropriate help from a licensed professional therapist.

⁴ Baird, Julia Churches Can No Longer Hide Domestic Violence, New York Times, May 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/opinion/churches-can-no-longer-hide-domestic-violence.html>.

Pastoral and congregational interventions include, but are not limited to:

- Preach from the pulpit and teach in small groups that IPV has no place in the church and is not aligned with the example set by Jesus Christ (see John 8:1-11);
- Have a written policy on IPV; train all church leaders and volunteers on the policy and follow the policy;
- Create safe spaces for private conversations;
- Clearly explain the clergy confidentiality policy and the exclusions from confidential communications;
- Post contact information about the local Domestic Violence Agencies on church bulletin boards and inside the stalls in the bathroom;
- Include the same information on the church's website;
- Invite professionals to speak about IPV as a public health issue; and
- Teach all age groups about healthy relationships.

These suggestions are not exhaustive but are examples of what can be done as congregations strive to stand against domestic violence.

Be familiar with the following resources and share them with others.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224 or (206) 518-9361 (Video Phone Only for Deaf Callers).

New Jersey Domestic Violence Hotline: 1 (800) 572-SAFE (7233)

New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) Hotline: 1 (800) 601-7200

New Jersey Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) Hotline: 1 (877) 218-9133
Toll Free-Non-Emergency

Rev. Wilson is a survivor of Domestic Violence. She works with congregations to lead difficult conversations on various topics concerning religion, race, gender, and health, as well as formulate cooperative solutions for those and related issues.